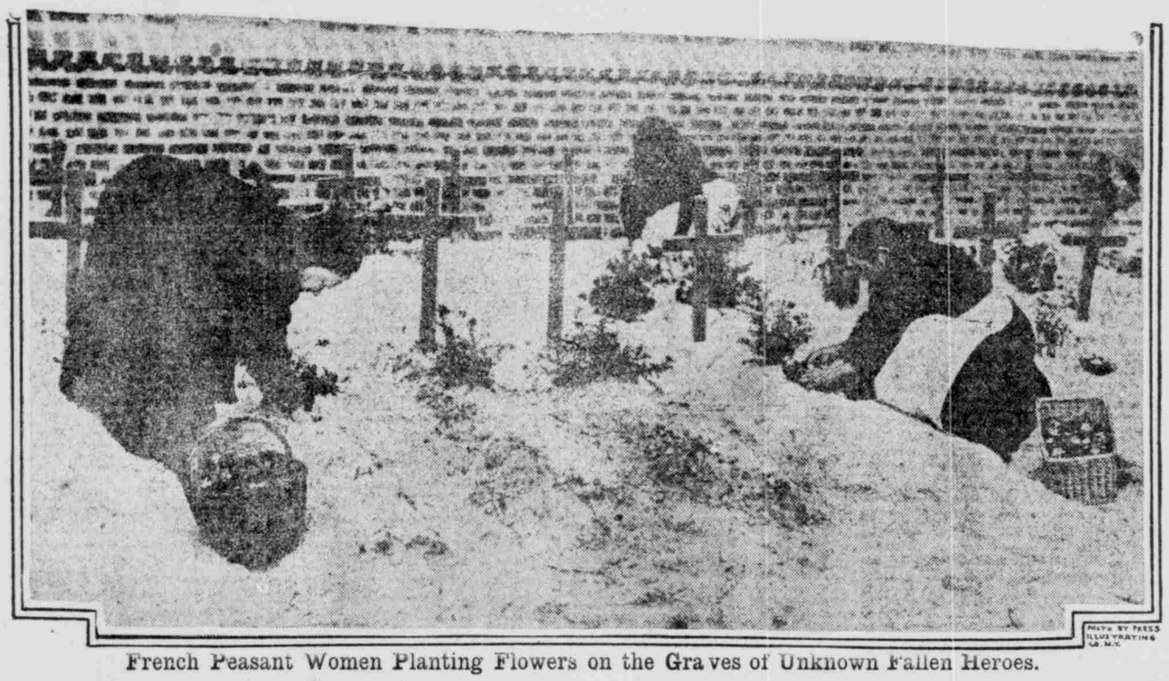
Pierre Loti Visits the Silent Army of the Dead

"I Do Not Think That Any Human Imagination Can Ever Conceive Anything as Sad as This Vast Cemetery of Young Soldiers in the Desert, in the Silence, Which One Yet Knows to Be Watchful, Hostile and Treacherous, and with These Terrible Neighbors Whose Menace One Feels Hanging Over All."



French Peasant Women Planting Flowers on the Graves of Unknown Fallen Heroes.

TO-DAY, which was one of comparative calm, the general had authorized me to take an auto for three or four hours and go in search of the grave of one of my nephews who had been killed by a shell during our offensive in September.

Incomplete information had apprised me that he might be in a soldiers' cemetery improvised the day after a battle five or six hundred yards away from the small town of T——, whose ruins, still bombarded every day and growing more and more shapeless, lie at the limit of the French zone, quite near the German trenches. I did not know how he had been buried. Did he lie in a common trench or perhaps under a little cross bearing his name, which would permit us to come later to carry him away?

"To go to T——," the general told me, "make a detour through the village of B——; that is the way you will run the least risk of being marked by the German artillery. At B——, if the conditions of your journey appear dangerous, a sentinel will stop you there according to rule. Then you will hide your auto behind a wall and you may continue your journey on foot—with the customary precautions, it is understood."

My faithful servant, Osman, who had shared my adventures in every country for twenty years and who is a soldier now, like everbody else, a territorial soldier, had had a cousin killed in the same battle as my nephew, and buried, they told him, in the same cemetery; he therefore obtained the authorization to accompany me in my pious search.

To-day everything is powdered with hoarfrost in the sinister countryside, over which hangs an icy fog; at sixty yards in front one can distinguish nothing, and the trees which line the roadsides fade away, lost in the immense white shrouds.

After a run of half an hour we enter completely into the gehenna of the front, to which when one has grown accustomed to it one no longer pays any attention, but which on the earlier occasions was so impressive and which later will seem so strange to look back on.

All the figures that ride on these enormous rolling machines breathe health and decision. We see among them our own soldiers now wearing the helmet of bluish steel which recalls the ancient "bourguignotte" and takes us back to the Middle Ages; there are yellow-bearded Russians, dark-skinned Hindoos and Bedouins. All these men march and march, carrying piles of fantastic objects, and there are also horses by the thousands threading their way between the innumerable big wheels. Indeed one might believe oneself at the epoch of a general migration of humanity, after some cataclysm that had changed the surface of the earth. But it is not that, it is simply the work of the great accursed one who has unloosed German barbarism; he had spent forty years in preparing the monstrous stroke which, according to his calculations, was to lead to the apotheosis of his mad pride, but which will only lead to his fall in a sea of blood amid universal loathing.

A moment of hesitation. I do not see any of the signs which are customary at the points where one must stop, nor the usual little red flag, nor the tree branch stuck in the earth, nor the warning sentinel raising his rifle with both hands above his head; the road is therefore considered to be passable to-day; and when I ask if it leads all the way to T——— the "sous-officiers," who are about, simply answer, with the military salute, "Yes, commandmant," and do not appear surprised that I am going there.

Then we have only to keep on our way, simply taking the precaution not to go too quickly, in order to avoid making much noise.

Simply from the silence in which we are plunged now, simply from the solitude, I should recognize that we are on the extreme front; for it is one of the strange features of the new war that always the tragic zone bordering on the burrows of the barbarians has the aspect of a desert; one sees no one there, everything is hidden, buried, and, except on the days when death roars with his terrible great voice, ordinarily one hears nothing.

We go forward, forward, in a setting of lugubrious monotony, which repeats itself unceasingly and is all vaporous, with an atmosphere as of muslin; at fifty yards behind us the scene disappears and closes up; fifty yards ahead it opens as we move forward, but without changing its aspect; always this whitish road with frozen ruts, always this white plain sketched out without its distances, always the heaviness of these masses of fog so cold and so white which take the place of air, always the two rows of trees crowded with frost, like great brooms which have been rolled in salt before they were stuck in the ground by the handle. One perceives that it is a region too often visited by lightning—by lightning or by something equivalent. How many trees there are split, twisted, whose branches hang in strips!

We cross the French trenches which run to the right and left of the road, keeping our faces to the unknown goal to which we are moving; these trenches are there ready in several lines, in preparation for the improbable event that some retirement of our troops might be necessary; but they are empty and we see always the continuation of the same desert. I stop from time to time to look around, my ear on the alert. Nothing, a silence as if nature herself had died of all this cold. The fog grows thicker and thicker and there are no glasses capable of enabling one to see through it. At the most those on the other side might hear us arriving. According to my maps we have two kilometres ahead of us at least.

Suddenly I think that I am witnessing an evocation of ghosts; heads, rows of heads, covered with the blue steel helmet spring together from the earth on the right and the left, far and near. Ah, they are our men I see, and they confine themselves to looking at us, scarcely showing themselves; but if these trenches, which we pass so quickly, are filled with soldiers on the alert it means that we are very near to the den of the ogre! Let us still continue on a little way, since the good fog follows us as faithfully as a companion.

Five hundred yards farther on I remember the German microphones which alone might betray us; the frozen earth and the fog are both marvellous conductors of sound. Then I have the sudden sensation that I have gone too far, that death surrounds me, that the fog alone protect us, and my responsibility for the lives of my soldiers makes me shiver; this is because I am not performing a duty ordered of me. To-day it is only an excursion, and under these circumstances, if a tragedy happened to one of these men, I should feel remorse for it all my life. There is barely time to stop my auto here. Then I will continue on foot towards the town of T——, in order to obtain information from our men installed in caves among the ruins, concerning the location of the cemetery I am looking for.

At this very moment a thick plantation of graves begins to show itself in a field on the left of the road; crosses, many crosses of white wood, aligned in serried ranks as numerous as stalks in the vineyards of Champagne; a humble cemetery of soldiers quite new and already so large, all powdered with frost like the plains around and infinitely desolate in this white earth, which does not show even a green blade of grass. Perhaps here is what we are looking for?

"Yes, it is here," cries Osman, "it is here. This is the grave of my poor cousin, the first commandant, in the line. I can read the name from here."

Now I can read it myself: "Pierre D——;" the inscription is in very large letters and the cross is more turned toward us than the others, as if to cry, "Stop, we are here, do not endanger yourselves by going any farther."

We get out, listening attentively to the silence. Not a sound, not a movement anywhere, unless it be the fall of a little icicle from the thin trees of the roadside. Our security seems absolute. Let us then enter tranquilly into the field, from which, it seems, this humble cross has called to us with a sign.

Osman had carefully prepared two little sealed bottles containing the names of the two dead men, to be buried at their feet, for fear that shells might sweep away the fragile woodwork that marks the graves; it is true we have foolishly forgotten the spade to dig up the earth, but we shall manage somehow. The two chauffeurs enter with us, for they had had the kindly thought, knowing why we were coming here, to bring each a photographic camera to take pictures of the graves. Pierre D—— had been found at once; we have, therefore, now only my nephew to look for in this frigid field of the young dead; to gain time, for the place is not very reassuring I must confess, we divide up the pious duty between us and each one covers a certain line with military precision.

I do not think that any human imagination can ever conceive anything as sad as this vast cemetery of young soldiers in the desert, in the silence which one yet knows to be watchful, hostile and treacherous, and with these horrible neighbors whose menace one feels hanging over all. Everything is white or whitish, starting with the soil of Champagne, which would be so by itself, without the innumerable little particles of ice with which it is covered. Not a bush, not a leaf, not even a blade of grass; nothing but this earth of a pale ashen gray, in which they have buried our soldiers.

To guide us later, when we come here to take him away, I draw in my notebook a plan of the cemetery, counting the rows of the tombs and the number of tombs in the rows. Hark! I hear bullets whistling! Three or four in succession! From what direction are they coming? They are surely meant for us, for their noise ends with that sort of little song, "Kouiyou! Koui-you!" which bullets make when they come to an end in your direction and very near to you. Silence falls again after this, but I hasten with my sketching.

As I stand here the horror of this place sinks deep within me. Ah! this cemetery, which, instead of coming to an end like real things, fades little by little into an enveloping mist; these graves, these graves, all studded with white icicles, which have run into the form of tears; this whiteness of the soil; this whiteness of everything, and now death, which comes to hover over us with a sound like the cry of some bird. Over there on the tomb of Pierre D—— I perceive Osman very vaguely in the fog. He has found a spade, no doubt, which had been left there by the grave diggers, and he is burying the little identifying bottle. Again I hear the whistle of the bullets. Koui-you! Koui-you! The place is decidedly unhealthy, as the soldiers would say, and it would be wrong of me to linger.

Now a shrapnel shell comes. Even before hearing it burst in the air I recognized it by the noise of its flight. This shot was aimed too much to the right, and the shower of bullets buries itself twenty or thirty yards away among the white hillocks. We have been observed, it is certain, and it is the microphones that have done it. The firing will keep up, and there is no shelter anywhere, not a trench, not a hole.

"Down on the ground, commandant," cries Osman to me from afar, for he sees a second shell coming toward me, while my attention is fixed on the graves. Of what good is it to lie down? That is useful in case of solid shells, but not with shrapnel bullets, which fall from above. No, what we need is our steel helmets, but rashly, not thinking there was danger here, we have left them in the auto with our gas masks. We must escape, we must run, that is all there is to do. Osman runs to me with his spade and his second little bottle. I cry to him, "No, no, it is too late; save yourself."

Good heavens! I remember that our auto has not been turned in the right direction! It would have been an elementary precaution to do that when we arrived here. I have committed a series of stupidities to-day; what is the matter with my head? It was because everything seemed so calm when we came into this cemetery. I cry to the two chauffeurs who are still photographing, "Leave everything, turn the auto quick, but not so quickly as to make a noise!" Osman has seized the opportunity of my speaking to the chauffeurs to begin digging near me. "No, stop that," I say to him, "you see that they are still firing; run and hide behind a tree in the road." "But it is almost done, commandant," he answers. "By the time the auto is turned it will be finished."

After all, I rather prefer that he should disobey me a little and finish his work. Never was a hole more hastily dug or bottle more hastily buried. When he has put in the bottle he throws back the earth, jumps on it to flatten it out and throws his grave digger's spade away. Then we run as hard as we can over the hillocks of our dead, silently begging them to pardon us. There is nothing so ridiculous, nothing which looks so foolish as running under fire. But I am not alone; I have the responsibility of the lives of these soldiers, and I should be criminal if I should delay for a second the flight of all of them.

The shrapnel shells continue to burst, scattering all around us their deadly hail. How strange are the refinements of modern war; death seeks us in the depths of the invisible, in the heart of the white clouds upon the horizon, hurled at us by people whom we do not see and who do not see us, hurled blindly but sure to find us sooner or later.

During this wild flight my imagination, left at liberty, turns back to that cemetery and its dead. The shrapnel shells, how strangely they sounded in the midst of that silence and in that extraordinary fog which increased as does a microphone the noise of their flight! It is, perhaps, the first time that I heard them thus, playing as a solo separated from all the habitual noises of the battle front, in intimacy, if I may saw so, and paying me the honor of a visit to myself alone. Never have I before experienced the almost physical sensation of the mad speed of a small, hard object, and of what must be the effect of its collision against a fragile obstacle, such as a chest or a head!

The adventure is over, we return to the village of B——. There the shrapnels can no longer hurt us. The heavy calibre guns alone could reach us there. We have not had a window broken, we have not received a scratch. By instinct the chauffeurs come to a stop in the road at the moment when I was going to tell them to do so, not because the auto had need of a breathing spell, but because we have need to look at our belongings, to put a little order in our things, which were thrown in pell-mell and which during our flight have been leading a wild dance in which photographic cameras, helmets and revolvers take a prominent part.

Then, like people who have at last found a sheltering doorway after running through the rain, we look at one another and feel a desire to laugh. Yes, we desire to laugh in spite of the agonizing memory of our dead so fresh in our minds, to laugh at our escape, to laugh at having succeeded in what we wished to do, and especially at having foiled the fellows who were shooting at us.

Willys Says Autos Awakened Interest In Good Road Work

The awakening of public interest to the importance of good roads in this country was given its chief impetus through the agency of the automobile, according to John N. Willys, president of the Willys-Overland Co., (represented locally by the Overland South Bend Co.) who has made an exhaustive study of the good roads subject.

"The amount of money spent in this country last year on highway construction amounted to approximately $250,000,000 but this huge expenditure was more than offset by the fact that land values in most localities were increased anywhere from 100 to 400 per cent by the road improvements. If an equal amount of money is put into road improvements each year for the next 10 years, the United States will be able to boast of more than a half million miles of good roads representing a cost of $2,500,000,000 and an appreciation in land values of fully $25,000,000,000.

"The big trunk lines such as the Lincoln highway and Dixie highway never would have been started had it not been for the motor car," says Mr. Willys. "And these two, I believe to be the forerunners of others that in time will give the United States as fine a system of highways as can be found in the world.

"What the coming of the automobile has accomplished in the way of road improvement work during the past 10 years is nothing compared to what it will do in the future. When you stop to consider that there is more than one motor vehicle to every 50 people in this country, it is easy to understand the tremendous interest taken in the good roads movement.

"With over two million cars in use at the present time and with an additional 1,200,000 planned for the year 1916, it is only logical to believe that in the years to come the proportion of good roads in the United States will be far in excess of what it is today.

"Figures compiled by experts show that only 10 per cent of our public roads are improved, while in many states the improved roads number less than five per cent. And, had it not been for the motor cars, this percentage would be still lower, for during the past 10 years we have built more good roads than in all our previous history."

SAYS AMERICAN BORN JAPANESE ARE LOYAL

President of Hawaiian Society Says Mikado Misunderstands Their Ideals.

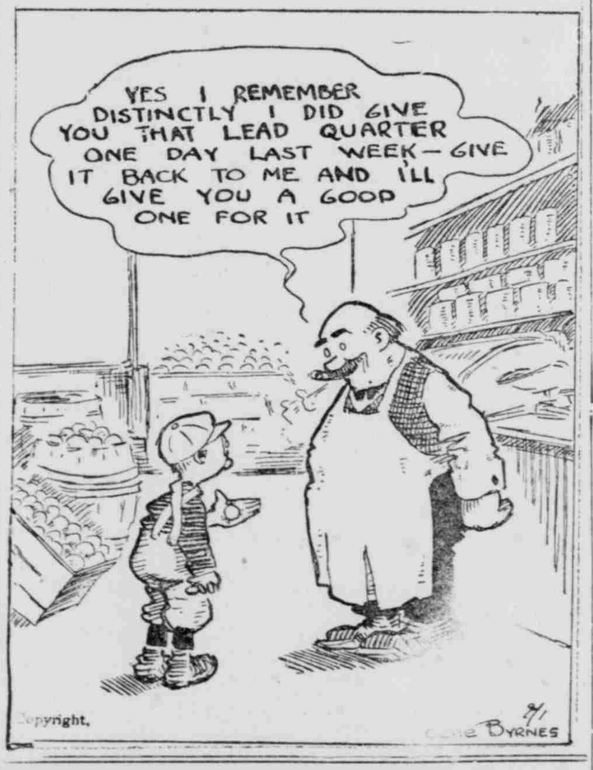
HONOLULU, Feb. 24.—Much discussion has been aroused in the Hawaiian Islands by a declaration of Americanism made Tuesday at the Washington birthday celebration at Hilo by Pres't Arawaka, of the Japanese-American society.

"American born Japanese are striving to get awey from Japan," Arawaka said. "They have found they cannot serve two masters and they are loyal Americans.

"The mikado misunderstands us by thinking we are Japanese subjects. We must stick to America ideals, even if we should have to fight our parents in case of war."

"Milk Maid," "Money Back" "Salt Rising," "Potato," "Whole Wheat" bread now have flags of all nations. South Bend Bread Co. Advt.

THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPEN



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COX IS IN AGAIN

Pastor Held in Chicago on Forgery Charges.

LAPORTE, Feb. 24.—Paris J. Cox, formerly pastor of the Friends church in this city, later pastor of M. E. churches at North Judson and Wheeler, Ind., and who was arrested and confined in jail at South Bend a couple of years ago for passing worthless checks as the alleged representative of an insurance company, being saved from prison by the devotion of his wife, is again in jail, this time in Chicago, where he is alleged to have forged deeds to valuable property.

Cox's home was formerly in Fort Wayne. Wealth which his father left him was dissipated in high living after Cox left the ministry.

HARRY OLIVER RECOVERING.

FRANKFORT, Ind., Feb. 24.—Harry Oliver, who killed his mother and attempted suicide last Sunday, was reported as gradually recovering Wednesday. Mrs. Oliver was buried Wednesday.

PROTEST TREATY.

SAN SALVADOR, Feb. 24.—The people of San Salvador Wednesday held a meeting in protest against the ratification by the United States senate of the treaty between the United States and Nicarauga. There was no disorder.

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